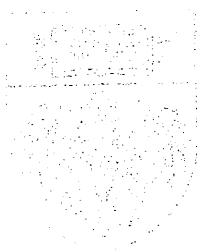


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OF

A SPECIAL PROVIDENCE:

BRIEFLY TESTED BY SCRIPTURE AND REASON.

A DISCOURSE,

BY REV. JOHN T. BROOKE,
RECTOR OF CHRIST CHURCH, CINCINNATI.

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THE DOCTRINE OF A SPECIAL PROVIDENCE.

“Man’s goings are of the Lord, how can man then understand his way?” Prov. xx. 24.

This proverb substantially asserts the sovereignty of God and the ignorance of man,—truths very fit to be associated in our meditations. For the sovereignty of God is a high, mysterious doctrine, and we know of no better corrective for the rebellious and presumptuous thoughts which sometimes rise up against it, than a proper sense of our own ignorance.

The first clause of the text, “man’s goings are of the Lord,” teaches that our actions natural as well as moral are governed of God. The latter branch, “how can a man then understand his way?” suggests that we are too ignorant to direct our own course. And the practical inference from both is, that we ought in all things to recognize the hand of God. For it is written, “In all thy ways acknowledge him, and he shall direct thy paths.”

The text might lead us into a direct discussion of high and much disputed points; but we prefer to treat it under an aspect less controversial, viz:—as teaching or fairly including the doctrine of a *particular providence*. A doctrine which is practically received, by all sound christians. For there is not a pious man upon earth, who does not, in his daily devotions, recognize the providence of God. And however christians may seem to differ in argumentative discourse; when they are upon their knees, they are of one mind, in acknowledging that “man’s goings are of the Lord.”

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To help the pious to a more intelligent and vivid apprehension of this truth, is one object which we have in view. But another and our main design is to remove scepticism: for there is a spirit of infidelity abroad, which often treats the doctrine of a special providence with unbecoming levity; and there are few points, perhaps, on which the bulk of nominal christians are moral sceptical and wavering. A discussion of the subject, therefore, may not be unprofitable. By the blessing of God, it may tend to remove the doubts of some and rivet the faith of others.

We propose then,—

First, To OFFER PROOFS OF THE DOCTRINE.

Secondly, To NOTICE SOME OF THE DIFFICULTIES CONNECTED WITH IT. And,

Thirdly, To DRAW FROM IT, A FEW PRACTICAL INFERENCES:

1. And first of scriptural proof. Here we assert that the Bible not merely teaches the doctrine of a providence, but declares it most amply and minutely. It affirms that God governs all things—for he “worketh all things after the counsel of his own will, and by him all things consist.” That he not only governs great matters or important events, but minute things—for “not a sparrow falleth to the ground without him,” and before him “the hairs of your head are all numbered.” Again: not only all matter, but all mind or intelligence is under the government of God. “He doeth according to his will in the army of heaven and amongst the inhabitants of the earth.” All human conditions are disposed by him, for “He maketh poor and maketh rich, bringeth low and lifteth up.” All human actions are directed by him; for “man’s goings are of the Lord.” And “It is not in man that walketh to direct his steps.” And not only actions but human thoughts and volitions, are governed of God; for we are not sufficient of ourselves even to think any thing as of ourselves; “it is God who worketh in you both to will and to do of his good pleasure.” And we read that “the Lord hardened Pharaoh’s heart”—that is, left him to his own wicked propensities. That some are “given up to strong delusion to believe a lie;” and that the “god of this world” is permitted to “blind the minds of them which believe not.” Such are a few of many scriptural proofs

of a providence. The *creation* of the world is not more distinctly ascribed to God than the *government* of it. To deny this doctrine, therefore, were virtually to reject Revelation. And he who rejects Revelation because of the mystery connected with this or any other subject, might for the same reason reject the existence of a God. For there is no greater mystery than the Divine existence. God himself is the greatest of all mysteries and wonders; and aptly has a sublime poet said,

—————“A God admitted
All other wonders cease.”

But although the scriptural proofs of a providence are sufficient, there are arguments from reason or natural religion which are by no means insignificant. Let us adduce some of them.

And first, we remark that the denial of a providence seems to conflict with the benevolence and wisdom of God. It represents God as creating the world, and then deserting his workmanship. It ascribes to the Divine Being a degree of callousness respecting the creatures of his own hands, which jars with our natural sense of fitness. If a mechanic invent ingenious machinery, he will take pleasure in superintending its operations. If a benevolent naturalist have a hive of bees, he will manifest an interest in them by watching over them, defending them from the weather and witnessing their instinctive skill and wisdom in the affairs of their little kingdom. And is there nothing analagous to this in God? Is there no similitude between divine and human benevolence? We grant that God is not altogether such an one as ourselves, for “his thoughts are not as our thoughts, neither are his ways as our ways;” but it is difficult to form a conception of the Divine benevolence, without associating with it a providence over the world. For although the world certainly exhibits signs of God’s curse or displeasure, it also retains many marks of his benevolence. And even if his benevolence were in wrath entirely withdrawn, and our earth were another Tophet, we should still expect his wisdom and power to remain and govern, and mete out the appropriate penalties. For we cannot suppose even a condemned world, without

supposing the wisdom and power of God there to discriminate or render to every one according to his deeds. Whatever view we take of our world, therefore, the absence of a providence appears to be inconsistent with the perfections of God.

We believe, however, that all except such as may be termed ultra-sceptical, admit what they call a *general* providence, but they deny a *special* providence or one which extends to smaller things. They appear to consider it beneath the Divine dignity, to descend to the care of trivial concerns or minute objects. But to this it might be sufficient to reply, that if it was not below the dignity of God to *create* the world in all its minutia, it cannot be unworthy of him to *govern* it. Again: the omnipresence* of God is a truth of natural religion. And if it be not inconsistent with his dignity to be *present* every where, it cannot be derogatory to him to *rule* every where. Nay it seems to be incongruous if not irreverent to suppose the Almighty to be present every where, but doing nothing—exercising no control—or reclining in a sort of dormant inertness. But they who advance this notion of the divine dignity, appear to regard God too much as a human sovereign, who from necessity, gives himself up to great matters, because he cannot simultaneously attend to smaller affairs. They seem to forget his wisdom and power. A wisdom which no minuteness can distract—a power which no multiplicity can oppress. And while they ascribe to God a sort of spurious, diminutive dignity, borrowed from human royalty, they detract from his infinite perfections—perfections alike capable of managing a universe of worlds—or a world of atoms! Away, then, with this notion, that it is undignified in the Almighty to take care of little things! It is the ascription of a paltry human majesty! which is dishonoring to the Great Eternal.

But we may add that this doctrine of a general providence carries the elements of its own explosion. For it is easy to show, that what man's wisdom may deem a trivial incident or a small matter may form a link in a chain of causes connected with a very grand result. And of course the providence of

*See Dr. Clarke's demonstration of the Being and attributes of God.

God must be special. Let us cite a few examples to illustrate what we mean. Take first the case of Joseph, the son of Israel. If Joseph had not dreamed a dream and related it, his brethren might not have been provoked to sell him into Egypt; the whole family of Israel might have perished of famine—and the stock from which the Messiah was to spring might have become extinct. So that, speaking reverently, we may say that God was pleased to suspend the promised redemption of the world upon the dream of an artless youth! Again: if Pontius Pilate had been more decided—if instead of delivering Jesus up to the clamorous multitude, he had sent him away privily or guarded by a cohort of soldiers, the Saviour would not have been crucified. So that God was pleased to suspend the fulfilment of the most important prophecy and promise upon the decision or indecision of Pontius Pilate. Take another instance from the history of our Revolution. If a few soldiers had not idly strayed from the American camp, just at a particular time, the unfortunate Andre might have consummated his mission. And who can tell how much of the welfare of this country, was resting under providence, upon the capture of that interesting British officer? Other examples might be given from the ordinary course of human events or the spontaneous workings of nature.—The great fire which occurred a few years ago in our commercial emporium, might have been caused by the dropping of a spark; but “behold how great a matter a little of fire kindled!” Again, a similar spark secretly applied in some process of nature, might have lighted a volcano or ignited a coal bank! While on the other hand, a single drop of water opportunely applied might have prevented any one of these catastrophes. See! the mighty potency of little things! These instances show that a fact, which at the time of its occurrence, is seemingly insignificant, may have a causal connection with a very grand and important event. Nor do we derogate from the glory of God by giving such examples. On the contrary, they honor his wisdom and power. For they show us that a dream, an idle inclination, an atom or a spark in his Almighty hand, may be as potent for his purposes, as an earthquake, an army, a hurricane, or all the concentrated lightnings of heaven! And

if this be true, what becomes of the doctrine of a general providence? *Generals* are made up of *particulars*; just as the whole is composed of parts. Of course we cannot receive the whole without receiving each part. The doctrine of a general providence, therefore, is not rational. And the choice to which we are reduced, is a choice between a special providence and *no providence* whatsoever!!

II. But this brings us to our second general division, which is, TO NOTICE SOME OF THE DIFFICULTIES OF THE SUBJECT.*

It is admitted, that the doctrine of a particular providence is mysterious, or connected with difficulty. But mystery may be great without extinguishing the clear evidence of a fact. And in such case the fact must be received, whether the mystery of it be explained or not. For that portion of a subject which is clearly proved cannot be affected by another part or branch, of which we continue ignorant.† For instance: the Newtonian doctrine of gravitation is admitted by all intelligent men; but although well established by proof, it is connected with much mystery. And when we inquire what is gravitation? or what is that inscrutable attraction which holds the earth in its orbit and balances ten thousand planets and stars in infinite space? we become lost in mystery. But who would think of denying gravitation, on account of the mystery connected with it? It would be unreasonable: It would be to face down facts, to despise the most competent testimonies, and to run off into the wildest scepticism. After the same manner, but with much greater force, may we argue

* Bishop Butler, in his *Analogy of Natural and Revealed Religion*, vindicates the moral government of God against many objections, on the ground, that it is a scheme imperfectly comprehended; or in other words, on the ground of our *ignorance*. He first shews that the *natural* government of God, suggests and makes it credible that his *moral* government must be a scheme quite beyond our comprehension; and of course he makes it appear highly probable that our objections and difficulties would be cleared up, if we could see or know the *whole* scheme of God's moral government. (See *Anal.* ch. vii.)

† The author of the *Analogy*, in the chapter above referred to, shews that our *ignorance* may be a satisfactory answer to objections against a thing, and yet not affect the *proof* of it:—or that our ignorance may invalidate *objections* to religion without impairing the *evidences* of it.

respecting the doctrine of a providence. For although our weak reason finds difficulty connected with it, by *denying* it we incur three-fold difficulties, not to say many plain inconsistencies; and we may lay it down as a sort of axiom or simple position not to be questioned:—THAT WHENEVER OUR REASON IS OBLIGED TO CHOOSE BETWEEN A GREATER AND A LESS DIFFICULTY, WE SHOULD CHOOSE THE SMALLER.

Our doctrine comes fairly under this axiom, for we have seen that the notion of a general providence is not rational; and of course, our choice must be either for or against a particular providence. And there is no medium. We cannot remain *in equilibrio* or in a state of indifference. For this is a fundamental point.* Settled neutrality here is equivalent to rejection; and rejection is tantamount to rebellion. It is refusing to recognize God's dominion or universal rule. And so far as practical piety is concerned, we might almost as well deny the existence of a God as refuse to acknowledge his government. If it be true then, that we *must* choose either for or against a special providence, it behooves every considerate man, and especially every man who lays claim to the character of a philosopher, to see where the weight of evidence lies, or on which side the main difficulty presses: and then to believe and act accordingly. Let this rule be fairly applied, and we have no fears for the result.

1. But it may be asked, "If God governs the world, why is so much wickedness permitted?" It is easy to perceive, that this is only one form or modification of the grand mystery or parent difficulty—WHY HAS MORAL EVIL BEEN PERMITTED AT ALL? A mystery that bears with just as much weight upon any kind of Deism, which admits the being of a God and his moral attributes—as upon Christianity. For the substance of the difficulty concerning moral evil, is, how to reconcile the permission of it, with the wisdom and goodness of God? and it is, at least, as hard to do this *without* a providence as *with* it. The inter-

* The author would not by any means be understood to intimate that *every view* taken in this discourse is fundamental. There may be those who dissent from some of his positions, and yet hold the doctrine in substance; but of course, in his humble judgment, they must hold it inconsistently.

vention of a providence certainly does not increase the task. Take away a providence and the difficulty remains in all its stubborn magnitude. And why should the sceptic reject a providence, sufficiently proved, because of a mysterious burden which he must bear at last, or else do what? Give up his own meagre system and sink into ATHEISM!!

But the sceptic does more than merely assume this difficulty in common with us. He assumes it under a form and in a connexion much less reasonable than we do. For *he* virtually affirms that God simply permits moral evil, and leaves it to work casually—just as it may—or at mere random! *We* maintain that he is a God of order; and that while he is pleased to permit evil, he extends his restraining and discriminating providence over all its parts and varieties, and causes it to work together for ultimate good. Which scheme is the more rational or the *less difficult*? Apply our axiom “of choosing the smaller difficulty,” and we think it will bring us at once to the scriptural doctrine of a providence.

2. A similar disposition might be made of another objection: which is this:—“Why are the wicked often greatly prospered in their temporal affairs?” for we might simply retort this question upon the professed believer in natural religion; and his difficulty in reconciling it with the moral attributes of God would certainly be the greater. For the Bible *fully* reveals, (what natural religion at best but merely *intimates*,) viz. a future state, where the wicked shall be punished in a degree proportioned to talents neglected or prosperity abused. And we further learn from the same volume, that prosperity is sometimes sent as a blinding curse. God may purposely leave the prosperous sinner to heap up riches and honors, until they become as an high wall, excluding the light of truth from his conscience, and shutting up his soul for destruction. Yea, the providence of God is not limited to the little theatre of this life which is but a span of human existence. And although an occasional stroke may be dealt out here, to remind us that a righteous God reigneth, full retribution or more formal penalties are reserved for the eternal world. Such is the light which Revelation sheds upon the prosperity of the wicked: It is certainly meridian light, compared with the dim rays which mere reason affords.

3. But "If God governs the world, why are good men often greatly depressed or sorely afflicted"? Here natural religion is dumb and can give us no satisfaction. But the same Revelation which declares a providence teaches the doctrine of innate depravity. And although this doctrine is itself mysterious, it is so confirmed by all history and by the fair testimony of every conscience, that to deny it were to choose much the greater difficulty. It would be to prefer darkness to a mysterious light. For original sin or innate depravity is the mystic light by which alone we can trace the source of all human wickedness and solve the in-felt contrarieties of our moral nature. Now with this doctrine we can go far towards explaining the sufferings of good men. For the scriptures teach us, that all are "by nature the children of wrath":—that the souls and bodies of all are forfeited to divine justice, so that none can be saved but "by grace through faith." The grace of God, however, co-operates with his providence. They work together in a parallelism:—or rather, they are inseparable parts of one entire system. And when grace calls and covenants with the sinner, it does not promise him exemption from suffering. On the contrary, it leads him to expect it as an instrument for purifying him and fitting him for heaven. True, indeed, there may be some mystery in the fact that God makes use of suffering or affliction to purify his people. But if the fact that good men suffer *for purification*, be mysterious, surely their suffering for no *perceptible or assignable cause whatsoever*, is a still greater mystery! one of these positions we must take, and of course sound reason cannot but prefer the former as the smaller difficulty.

4. But "how shall we reconcile the special providence of God with the free agency of man?" "How can God work all things after the counsel of his own will, and yet hold the creature responsible for his actions?" To this question we frankly reply that we cannot explain *how* the providence of God co-operates with the liberty of the human will. Nor is it necessary that we should. It is sufficient to shew the fact that they *do* work in harmony. And this we have in substance already shewn. We have offered sufficient proof of a providence.—The free agency of man we take for granted as a matter of

personal consciousness.—Their harmonious co-operation is a necessary consequence; and the question to be decided by every reasoning man is this:—Is it not more difficult to set aside the proofs of a providence than to admit its harmony with free-agency as a mystery? Let candid sober reason apply our axiom in choosing between these propositions, and we think we may venture to abide the event.

But in order to shed more light upon the subject or to shew more clearly that these two great truths do co-work in perfect harmony, let us offer a few examples taken from the sacred writings.

We have already referred to the case of Joseph; and it cannot be doubted that his translation into Egypt was in accordance with the decree or purpose of God. The Psalmist, indeed, expressly tells us that *God* sent Joseph into Egypt.* And yet, on the other hand, it can as little be doubted, that when his brethren, moved by envy, sold him for a slave, they acted as freely and as culpably as if the transaction had never had the least connexion with any purpose or providence of God. In accordance with this view of the subject we find Joseph several years after speaking to his brethren after this manner:—"But as for you, ye thought evil against me; but God meant it for good, to bring to pass as it is this day, to save much people alive."†

Take another example. In the xxii. chapter of the first book of Kings, we read, that "a certain man drew a bow at a venture, and smote the king of Israel between the joints of the harness"; or "between the joints and the breast-plate," just where his armor left him exposed. Ahab, who is the king here spoken of, was a wicked monarch, whom God had doomed to destruction, and his death in this very battle had been predicted by the prophet Micaiah. The king however, disregarded the prediction and maltreated the prophet; and in order to make his life secure, disguised himself by changing his apparel. But he could not defeat the purpose of God. The arrow of a Syrian soldier "shot at a venture" pierced his vitals. An impressive proof, that not only the intentions or deliberate pur-

*Ps. cv. 17.

†Gen. l. 20.

poses of man, but all that is called "venture" or chance, also, is made to subserve the wise and righteous designs of God.

We offer one more familiar and solemn example,—It cannot be denied that the death of Christ was appointed or decreed. Not only his death, but the mode and circumstances of it were predicted by the prophets. But who, in reading the narrative of his arraignment and crucifixion can doubt, that Judas who betrayed him, the priests who bribed Iscariot, Pilate who delivered Jesus, and the multitude who clamored for his crucifixion, acted as freely and as culpably as if there had been no purpose or prediction of God connected with the event? That they *did* thus act freely and culpably and yet fulfil the appointment of God, the apostle Peter distinctly asserts: for in his discourse to the Jews on the day of Pentecost he holds this language: "Him being delivered by the determinate counsel and foreknowledge of God, ye have taken and by wicked hands have crucified and slain him." In this solemn instance, we see God making use of the corrupt volitions of wicked men, to accomplish his purposes without violating their moral liberty, or acquitting them of guilt.

In view of these scriptural examples, we see not how any sensible believer in Revelation can doubt that God can and does accomplish all his designs, both in the natural and spiritual world, in a manner perfectly accordant with the freedom and responsibility of his creatures.

III, To conclude—*with a few practical inferences*, Christians should consider it a high privilege to recognize a providence and to commit their way unto the Lord. Jesus comforted his disciples with this doctrine in view of the perils and persecutions which they were to encounter. For he "said unto them are not two sparrows sold for a farthing? and one of them shall not fall to the ground without your father. But the very hairs of your head are numbered. Fear not, therefore, ye are of more value than many sparrows." A genuine believer, more than any other, feels his own weakness. He hath "no confidence in the flesh:" and with wars without and fears within, how comforting to realize that "the Lord reigneth":—yea, "that Jesus himself is Head over all things to the church":—and as such, not only governs all outward things,

but by his spirit "worketh in us both to will and to do of his good pleasure." Heaven and earth may pass away, but surely one jot or one tittle of the promises of such a Saviour cannot fail!

Let believers, also, make this doctrine a test, by which to prove their hearts. For to realize the particular providence of God is one of the distinguishing marks of a renewed mind. And were we asked to point out a growing thriving believer, we would direct your attention to one who could sing from his heart—

"In each event of life how clear,"

"Thy ruling hand I see."

Such a man, with Moses "endures as seeing him who is invisible." Like Noah and Enoch he walks with God—"walks by faith, not by sight." And "his ways are ways of pleasantness, and his paths are paths of peace." Surely neither great sin nor grievous sorrow is likely to overcome us, while we feel the presence and agency of God as a father; of purer eyes than to behold evil; "but plenteous in mercy" and almighty to save.

But to those whose hearts are set to live impenitently, our doctrine brings no present comfort. Hence one reason of so much scepticism concerning it.—Hence the disposition of too many, we fear, to generalize the subject; to limit the providence of God to a few distant points or widely sundered lines, so that the sin-living soul, may feel more at large and at ease in its indulgences. Ah! brethren, if the sinner vividly realized the immediate presence and providence of God as the christian does, he could not rest. He would be afraid to lay himself down to sleep at enmity with that Almighty Being, who in a moment, could put his finger upon the main-spring of life, and leave his body as dumb and as still as a broken time-piece! And when this doctrine is first heard with the hearing ear, and understanding heart, it can bring a terror to the soul like that which the earthquake brought upon the jailor of Philippi, when he cried, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?"

And let none attempt to seek excuse among the "secret things which belong to the Lord." We have heard the voice of Revelation declaring that the providence of God affects not

the responsibility of man: Conscience, too, forewarns every man that God will hold him to a fair and just account for his wilful neglect of the gospel—and both concur in the call, “Turn ye, turn ye, for why WILL ye die.” Be assured that the Saviour most freely and kindly invites you to come to him for life. And if in striving to come you feel the burden of sin pressing you, do not yield, but persevere—keep near the means of grace, they are the ways in which Jesus walks; and when you think you have sounds or signs of his coming, let your spirit cry fervently, like blind Bartimeus of old, “Jesus, thou son of David, have mercy upon me!” And he who heard and healed the blind man will hear and save you—“For whosoever shall call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved.” Amen.

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